A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter Ten

The hour had come. After a day of waiting, the General Grievous would receive the decision of the Confederate Congress. He was almost excited for what was going to happen. Would he be able to continue the war, or would he have to go rogue? Both options were appealing.

Grievous stood before the silent Congress chamber. The green woman from the other day was gone, but he hardly paid it any mind. At length, one among them stepped forward. Or rather, slithered, as it was the serpent. Corlissi Ludar, Grievous had been told his name was. "General Grievous," he began, speaking up to him from the floor, "in accordance with the Constitution of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, you are now, by law, Head of State. However, given your lack of political experience and your unrestrained personality, this Congress has deemed it necessary to remind you that this is a *democratic* government. You will be held accountable by this Congress, and you will follow all laws, past, present, and future passed by this Congress. Swear to uphold and defend the Constitution from all threats within and without, and you will have the allegiance you seek."

Bold, most bold, thought Grievous. He narrowed his eyes, but saw no other choice before him. "I swear it." Grievous said, raising a hand. If all came to naught, then he'd just ignore this toothless shadow government as Dooku had.

"Then it is done," Ludar spoke, bowing his head.

"You have chosen wisely," Grievous said, wishing again that he had the ability to smile, if only to intimidate his inferiors.

"I only hope that is so," the serpent sighed. "You are the last hope of the Confederacy, General. We cannot deny that the odds are against us."

"I have known this for some time. Which is why, as Supreme Commander, I have a list of requests..." He stopped, and looked to the cameras recording the chamber. "But that will be saved for a more private discussion. I will not pretend I know much about politics of a *democratic* government. I am a war leader, not a politician. Therefore, I ask that this Congress submit their recommendations to me."

"Count Dooku declined to form a cabinet, but that would be my recommendation," said Ludar. "You will need ministers to help handle the affairs of government."

"Very well." Grievous nodded. "I will leave it to this Congress to choose them. Know that I do not tolerate incompetence, cowardice, or greed. Those who impede me end up removed from my path. Send me people who have spirit and ability, if any exist among you. Until then, I will be taking care of war matters."

He turned, and left to exit, his two magnaguards following. But as Grievous opened the door, he suddenly lost contact with the signal of the two guards on the other side. Momentum carried him through before he could stop himself, but he only needed a single second to react to what he saw coming at him.

When the two magnaguards leaving the podium turned on their electrostaffs, Esera knew something was wrong. When they were felled by a hail of blaster fire, she knew something was *really* wrong.

"What just-" Lirka began to say, but Esera grabbed her by the arm and bolted for the nearest exit. More blaster fire followed, and chaos erupted in the chamber. "Gunfire isn't normal here, Esera!" Lirka said, looking alarmed.

"I didn't think it was!" answered Esera, pulling her into the hall. "I don't know what's happening here, but if I had to guess, someone isn't happy you just appointed *General Grievous* to office."

"Yeah, maybe," said Lirka, glancing up and down the hall. Armored figures appeared at the far end.

"You! Halt!" they ordered.

"Um-" Lirka began, but Esera just pushed her again and ran.

"Go!" she shouted. More blaster fire followed, aimed at them, and aimed well. Only a sense of danger through the Force gave Esera the warning to make a sudden twist to the left, and a red bolt slammed into the wall ahead of her. It would have shot her straight through the heart had she not moved. "Through that door!" Esera pointed at the one that said restricted access, where Grievous had contemplated killing her yesterday.

Lirka did as told, and they went up the stairs into the service hall. "Why is this happening?" she whined, looking back down to the door. "What do we do?"

"When lacking orders, find a suitable defensive location and hold your ground..." Esera recited the Grand Army of the Republic's doctrine. But they couldn't do that, they were unarmed, because Esera's lightsaber was with R8 in the basement garage. "We need to get to my droid. He's got my weapon." she stated.

"I knew you were a secret agent," sighed Lirka. "But how do we get there?"

A service elevator caught Esera's eye. After pushing the button to no effect, and then opening the doors, she realized that the elevators must have been taken offline. Thankfully, she still had her utility belt... Esera swallowed nervously, looking at the elevator cable. "Well, I have one way in mind, but I don't like it."

"You don't mean..?" Esera nodded grimly. "No, no way." Lirka looked aghast. "I don't do this kind of-" Just then, they heard rapid footsteps on the stairs.

"You take your chances with them, or me." said Esera.

"I'm going to regret this..." groaned the Sephi. Luckily, Esera wouldn't have to use her hands on the cable, she had a special tool that could clamp on to the cable to slow their descent. Lirka had to cling to her for dear life, not a simple feat given that she was well over half a head taller. It took about two minutes for them to descend at a speed that wouldn't give her passenger a heart attack. This kind of thing was something Jedi trained for, but junior politicians definitely didn't. At the bottom, Esera's feet gently touched the top of the elevator, while Lirka fell into a heap. "I never want to do that again!" she gasped.

"I never *wanted* to do that again," muttered Esera. She pulled open the hatch on the top, and dropped into the elevator proper. Lirka followed, much more cautiously, and managed to fall as she landed. As quietly as she could, Esera opened the elevator doors, and peered into the room beyond. All clear.

"I think this is the water pump facility," Lirka whispered, looking around the empty place. There were control panels and read-outs, but everyone who might have been here was gone. "We're definitely in the basement."

"Can you get to the garage from here?" asked Esera.

"Probably?" guessed Lirka. "But what are we going to find? Those guys came out of nowhere, and they were shooting at us! We need to find out what's going on!"

"One thing at a time." Esera said. They made their way through the pumping facility, and into a bare duracrete hallway. They did encounter the mysterious soldiers at one point, but the two hid themselves in empty trash bins before being noticed.

"They're Gossams," Lirka said, once they were gone, peaking out from under the lid of her bin.

"Commerce Guild?" Esera wondered. "Why would they be doing this?"

"The Commerce Guild is always causing trouble in Congress," said Lirka, her eyes narrowing. "They always block peace proposals and never vote for anything constructive. I think they just want a war so they can make money off it."

"Last I heard, Commerce Guild stocks were tanking... And that was months ago." Esera climbed out of her bin, while Lirka did the same. "This might be their way of trying to ditch the Separatists and hope the Senate is lenient with them."

"And you just *know* they'll get away with it!" spat Lirka, sneering in the direction the soldiers had gone. "They'll probably get a million kickbacks and tax cuts once they've gone back to the Republic's side." The Sephi's feelings about the Commerce Guild surprised Esera. The galactic megacorporations had been instrumental in funding the Separatist cause, and while they were officially neutral, they continued to do the majority of their business with the Separatists. To find such anger directed at them here was unexpected.

"Worry about that later, let's get to the garage," Esera and Lirka continued on through the underground halls, as silently as they could, until they arrived at their destination. The underground parking garage was filled with the airspeeders and skycars of all the dignitaries, plus workers, plus visitors. Lirka's vehicle was easy to spot in the dim light. As they made their way over, they found a powered-down B1 battle-droid with red shoulder markings. "That confirms it, they're moving against the Separatists." said Esera.

"You're making it sound like you're not one of us..." Lirka said.

R8-M5 was happy to see them unharmed. After plugging him into the car's computer for translation, they found out that he'd seen the Commerce Guild troops seal off the exits to the outside; they were trapped in here. They decided to ditch their heavy congressional robes, they'd just slow them down. Esera retrieved her lightsaber from his storage compartment, and then the three departed for the safety of the halls. "What is that thing?" Lirka asked.

"My weapon," Esera told her.

"Why are we bringing the droid?"

"He'll be able to access the building's central computer. Maybe we can find another way out."

Of course, finding a terminal to access would be the problem- "Representative Horthy!" Lirka suddenly blurted out. Esera looked around, trying to find this Horthy. She spotted a head sticking out of a hatch along the bottom of a wall.

"Oh, Miss Lirka, good morning!" said the man, his white hair covered in dust. Somehow, he managed to squeeze out of the hatch, despite his bulky frame. This was the same fellow who had been on the news last night, Esera realized. He too had lost the grey robes, and was just wearing normal day clothes like the two of them. "Who's your friend?" he asked.

"This is Esera, she's a secret agent, we're trying to find a way out!" said Lirka.

"Wayne Horthy, damn glad to meet you!" Horthy shook Esera's hand vigorously before she had a chance to say anything. "So, you're a secret agent?"

"No," Esera said. "I've just been in these situations before."

"So have I," said the big man. "I noticed the corporate representatives were gone this morning, well, except the Techno Union one. Seems kinda suspicious. Then I was told that the police headquarters were bombed a few minutes ago... I took a guess and moved out. Heard gunfire later, took to some secret ways I've discovered."

"Yes, they took down Grievous's guards, and might have got him too," Esera said. "Do you know another way out of here? The garage exits are blocked."

"Hold up, Miss Esera," Horthy said, raising a hand. "Did you say they got the General?"

"I think?" Esera shrugged. "I saw him go through the door, and then there was blaster fire."

"Screw breaking out then, we've got to help the General!" declared Horthy. "These guys don't know we're free, do they?"

"Wait- what? *Help* Grievous?" Esera gaped at him. "First of all, how? You're politicians, not fighters, and there's only three of us and the droid versus who knows how many of them! Second of all, *why* would we help that murderer?"

They both gave her concerned looks. It was Horthy who spoke first. "First of all, I'm a rancher, I know how to handle myself in a gunfight. Second of all, calling General Grievous a murderer seems awfully subversive. I think you've been watching too much HNN."

"Yeah, Esera," said Lirka, "General Grievous is our leader, we have to help him!"

Esera sighed, and put a hand to her forehead. "I have a lot of doubts about this."

"If you want to run, you can," said Lirka. "*We're* going to save the General, that's our patriotic duty. You went from lost to on-point the moment things got crazy, so I know you know what you're doing, and we're gonna need your help. But I won't make you."

Isn't this a hard choice? Esera thought. Lirka was her only real friend in the whole galaxy right now. The Jedi Council had cast her out, the Republic had turned its back to her, Polis Massa had banned her, but this Separatist had taken her in based on nothing more than good will. Was she going to repay that unwarranted kindness by abandoning her, like the Jedi had abandoned Esera herself? Or would she honor her debts, even if it meant rescuing the last person who ever deserved to be rescued by a Jedi?

Yes, Esera decided. She was not like the Jedi Council, she was not like Aspar or Admiral Holt or or the Governor of Shumavar or any of them. She was not like what the Republic had become. She wasn't like the Polis Massans, who would yield to wrong. There was nowhere else to go, there was no one else to turn to, there was no one else who could protect her from being given the Tano treatment. Esera was now aligned with the Separatists, whether she liked it or not. And if there were good people like Lirka among the Separatists, then perhaps there was hope for them yet.

"Alright, I'll join you," Esera said. R8 looked at her, blinking his photoceptor. "You too, R8, we're in this together." He beeped in affirmation.

"Excellent," said Horthy. "We're gonna need a woman with a head on her shoulders. No offense intended, Miss Lirka. I doubt you're trained for a fight."

"None taken," Lirka said.

"Alright, I'm going to the garage, I've got some guns in my speeder. Miss Esera, you stay around here with the droid and Miss Lirka." Esera nodded, and off Horthy went.

"How did I get into this?" sighed Esera.

Lirka shrugged, and gave her an apologetic look. "Sometimes I wonder the same thing. But between you and Representative Horthy, I'm sure we'll be fine!"

"Truly, these are interesting times," remarked Corlissi Ludar.

"I'd rather live in anything but," said Tyreca Bremack. "Hatti, get over here!" she called. The Skakoan looked up, and glided across the floor to them. "Why are Commerce Guild troops holding us at gunpoint?"

"I am the wrong person to ask," said Muwat Hatti, the Techno Union representative to the Confederate Congress. "Just because the Commerce Guild has done something, does not mean the Techno Union was informed. We are rivals, not business partners."

"Hmph." Bremack snorted. "In case you haven't noticed, all the other representatives of the corporations are gone."

"Except me," said Hatti. "If there was a plot, I was not informed, and thereby, the Techno Union was not informed. I am as clueless as the rest of you."

"Pointing fingers will get us nowhere," said Ludar. "We need to figure out what's going on."

"That's not exactly possible from here." Bremack crossed her arms, and stared at the Gossam soldiers guarding the exits. "What are they waiting for?"

"They're probably going to execute us soon," said Lan Cathida from behind them. The huge Karkarodon was made even bigger in stature by the water tank he had hooked up to his gills. "It's how our junta on Mintooine took power. I don't intend to go out quietly, though."

"Of course not," Ludar said, picking up his datapad. "Cathida, how good are you at organization?"

"About as good at it as I am at being peaceable. Why?" he asked.

"I'm thinking of candidates for Minister of Industry," answered Ludar. "It is what Grievous asked us to do."

"Ugh, Sluissi," groaned Bremack. "Nothing ever gets you on edge."

"We all must play our part, no matter the distractions," Ludar said.

"That is an admirable dedication," said Hatti. "You would make a fine laborer on one of our forge-worlds."

"I'm not sure if that's compliment or not," said Ludar, giving Hatti a narrow-eyed look.

"Hey," Cathida tapped Ludar's shoulder, "watch this." The Karkarodon stood up to his full height, towering several heads over everyone else. He trudged over to the pair of Gossams at the nearest entrance. "I need to switch the water in my tank." he told them. When the guards looked at each other in confusion, he simply grabbed their heads and smashed them together. Cathida took their guns, and bounded out of the chamber before anyone knew what happened.

"That absolute madman..." Hatti muttered. Moments later, blaster fire, screams, and the distinct roar of the Karkarodon were heard in the hall, fading away.

"You wouldn't see that happening on Coruscant," said Bremack with a tired sigh, putting her chin in her hands. "Maybe he'll get word out of what's happened."

"The question is, was it worth it?" Ludar wondered. "If they weren't on guard before, they certainly will be now." He looked around the chamber, trying to see if anyone else was missing besides the corporate dignitaries and the rogue Lan Cathida. Wayne Horthy had excused himself earlier, his paranoia about tyranny had probably been triggered, and correctly for once. That charming young Sephi from Thustra was gone too – Lirka, wasn't it? And one of the Subterrel representatives was gone, the Human girl who looked like she had been about to be sick the other day. Oras Wendil, the stealthy Umbaran, she was gone too. She'd been here moments ago... perhaps she'd used the confusion of Cathida's breakout to escape as well? Everyone else was accounted for, though. Whatever was going to happen, it rested with those five now, and whomever else they encountered outside the Congress chamber. *Good luck,* Ludar thought. They were going to need it. His cynical side didn't have much hope for them.

When Horthy had said he had some guns in his speeder, Esera had thought he'd bring back a blaster pistol or two. Instead, he'd come back with a veritable armory. "Good grief..." Esera sighed, when he placed the bundle of armaments on the floor. "What were you planning for, a one-man insurgency?"

"The Confederacy's constitution guarantees the right of citizens to bear arms freely. I'm merely exercising that right," he said. There were three pistols, two larger blasters, a slugthrower rifle, and a vibroknife in the bundle he'd brought back. Horthy strapped two of the pistols to his own belt, as well as the vibroknife, and slung the rifle over his shoulder on a strap, before taking one of the large blasters. He handed the other large blaster to Esera. "You look like you know your way around weapons." he said.

"I do..." Esera took the gun, and looked it over. The thing looked like it'd been built out of spare parts.

Lirka just got one pistol. "More for self defense than anything," said Horthy.

"Yeah... I've never even held a gun until today," Lirka agreed.

"Stay behind us, don't get heroic, point the shooty end at the enemy," Horthy told her. "Has your droid figured out the situation in the building yet?" he asked.

"More or less," Esera said. They'd found a terminal for R8 to plug into, and he'd quickly discovered what had occurred. "It seems that the Commerce Guild took over the security system sometime last night to prevent their infiltration from being noticed, and then started looping blank video feeds to all the cameras in the morning, rendering them invisible to anyone watching. They also shut down communications in and out of the building, and have locked down all the exits. Now that they're in control, the security system is working as intended. That's why we unhooked the camera over there." Esera pointed to the corner. "We should assume they know we're here, and that they're on their way now. I suggest we get moving. I advise we take the service halls, there's far fewer cameras there."

"Agreed." Horthy nodded. "How'd you get down here in the first place?"

"We went down the elevator shaft... with no elevator." Lirka shuddered.

"She really is a secret agent," muttered Horthy. "We'll take my way up. There's a maintenance passage that leads from here to the fourth floor. Do some stretches, ladies, we got a lotta ladders to climb."

Author's note: Finally, some action! Esera finds herself in what might be the most awkward position of all time. I was gonna make an analogy to the recent American election, but those wounds might be too fresh for some.

And now for a brief personal rant: Sorry about being technically a day late (it's only 50 minutes past midnight at the time of writing this). My coworkers, unlike me, decided not to get flu shots this season. They all now have the flu. There's no one left to call in to replace the sick, so I'm doing a 40+ hour week and covering for multiple people. Like Han Solo said, no reward is worth this!

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